

4 Atypical Models of Sanctity

One can detect in Western culture in the twentieth century – a culture that has been famously described as seared by the acids of modernity – a longing for saintliness, albeit detectable in unexpected places.
(Cunningham 2005: 108)

This chapter deals with the representation of sanctity in contemporary Italian fictional literature. According to Leone, “... saints are among the most formidable communication media of Catholicism. Through saints, the Church proposes some narrative models of spiritual perfection. By embracing such models, believers are able to conform to certain religious values” (Leone 2010: 12). According to this perspective, hagiographic literature can be described as a narrative blueprint providing a path towards religious perfection or, in Grégoire’s words, the vehicle of “a doctrine which is philosophy and theology, ethics and mysticism, sociality and personalism”.²⁷⁶ Hagiographic literature can therefore be interpreted as vulgarized theology:

... Hagiographic literature vulgarizes the conclusions of learned theology in some way. It is popular literature that performs a substitute and complementary didactic function. Hagiographic writing [...] adapts to the elementary level of each audience; a type of narrative that has become intelligible inculcates the most difficult elements of faith and religion. Hagiographers are thus a kind of “popular theologians”! This methodology was decisive for transmitting the doctrine, for preserving its orthodoxy and for its integrity.²⁷⁷

Saints therefore function as signs, the decoding of which offers a better understanding of human existence:

²⁷⁶ “una dottrina che è filosofia e teologia, etica e mistica, socialità e personalismo” (Grégoire 1987: 3).

²⁷⁷ “l’agiografia, in qualche modo, volgarizza le conclusioni della teologia dotta. E’ una *letteratura popolare*, che svolge una funzione didattica sostitutiva e complementare. Il racconto agiografico [...] si adegua al livello elementare di ogni pubblico; un racconto diventato intelligibile inculca gli elementi più difficili della fede e della religione. Così l’agiografo è quasi un ‘teologo popolare’! Questa metodologia è stata decisiva per la trasmissione della dottrina, per la preservazione della sua ortodossia e per la sua integrità” (Grégoire 1987: 19).